

the word faith is one of the MOST ELUSIVE AND HARD TO DEFINE WORDS IN THE CHRISTIAN VOCABULARY. IT IS A MANY SIDED WORD AND CAN MEAN MANY DIFFERENT THINGS. WE SPEAK OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND MEAN THE TOTAL SYSTEM OF THE BELIEFS THAT ARE CHRISTIAN. FOR SOME PEOPLE FAITH MEANS BLIND, UNQUESTIONING ACCEPTANCE OF SOMETHING SOMEBODY HAS TOLD THEM, / FOR OTHERS HAVING FAITH MEANS FEELING HAPPY: FOR STILL OTHERS IT MEANS SERIOUSNESS AND PENITENCE. FAITH IS USED TO MEAN CONFIDING^{IN} SOMETHING--WE HAVE FAITH OUR FRIENDS OUR NATION IN OURSELVES. THIS MORNING, HOWEVER, I WANT TO TAKE A LONG LOOK AT WHAT IT MEANS on a personal level - in a religious context. TO "HAVE FAITH" OR WHEN WE SAY "HAVE FAITH."

IN OUR SCRIPTURE READING THIS MORNING WE HAVE SEEN TWO BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF MEN THAT HAD FAITH. JESUS WAS WALKING DOWN A ROAD WHEN HE WAS SUDDENLY ENCOUNTERED BY A MAN WHO WAS CRIPPLED AND MAIMED WITH LEPROSY. MANY SUPERSTITIONS AND PREJUDICES OF THE DAY WERE CONNECTED WITH THE DREADED DISEASE: FOR INSTANCE A LEPER WAS CONSIDERED BY THE JEWS TO BE UNCLEAN, SPIRITUALLY AS WELL AS PHYSICALLY, / ~~AND~~ IF A JEW CAME IN CONTACT WITH ONE, IN ANYWAY WHATSOEVER / HE HAD TO PURIFY HIS SOUL BEFORE A PRIEST: / A HOUSE THAT HAD BEEN ENTERED BY A LEPER HAD TO BE PURIFIED BY A PRIEST BEFORE THE INHABITANTS COULD REENTER IT. IF A LEPER'S SHADOW FELL ON A JEW HE WAS UNPURE; THERE WAS A REGULATION OF LAW THAT SAID NO ONE COULD COME WITHIN SIX FEET OF A MAN HAVING LEPROSY. / AND WORST OF ALL THE JEWS BELIEVED THE DISEASE TO BE A FORM OF DIVINE PUNISHMENT, / THIS LAST BIT OF SUPERSTITION CAUSED THE LIFE OF A LEPER TO BE MISERABLE

BEYOND COMPREHENSION, NOT ONLY WAS IT EVIL TO ASSIST A MAN WHO HAD INCURRED THE
PUNISHMENT OF GOD, THE MISERABLE SOULS WERE RIDICULED AND PERSECUTED BY THE RIGHTEOUS
JEWISH POPULATION. THEY WERE ABSOLUTE AND UTTER OUTCASTS DOOMED TO LIVE IN CON-
STANT PAIN AND TORTURE, UNTIL THEY EITHER STARVED TO DEATH OR WERE SLOWLY ANNIHILATED
BY THE HEDEYOUS DISEASE.

IT WAS ONE OF THESE WRETCHED PEOPLE WHO APPROACHED JESUS AND SAID "LORD, IF YOU
 WANT TO YOU CAN RID ME OF MY PAINS." THIS WAS A MAN THAT HAD HEARD OF JESUS WONDROUS
 WORKS, HE HAD SEEN CROWDS OF PEOPLE FOLLOWING A MAN THEY CALLED THE MESSIAH, MORE THAN
 LIKELY HE HAD SEEN JESUS HEAL THE SICK ON SOME OCCASION. THERE WAS NO DOUBT IN HIS
 MIND AS TO WHETHER JESUS WAS ABLE TO HEAL HIM, HIS ONLY RESERVATION WAS THE FACT OF
 HIS PERSONAL WRETCHED MISERY, IT TOOK QUITE AN ACT OF COURAGE FOR THE LOWEST ~~SCUMMOO~~ ^{BEING IN}
 SOCIETY TO APPROACH A MAN WHO WAS CALLED MESSIAH TO BE HEALED. THE LEPER HAD SEEN
 AND HEARD, HE KNEW JESUS TALKED ABOUT LOVING EVERYBODY, AND THAT NO ONE WAS BETTER
 THAN ANYONE ELSE, AND HE BELIEVED THESE THINGS. HE NOT ONLY BELIEVED IN JESUS CHRIST
 HE BELIEVED WHAT HE SAID, AND HE WAS HEALED.

THE ROMAN CENTURIAN WAS A DIFFERENT INDIVIDUAL AND A DIFFERENT SITUATION ALTOGETHER.
 A CENTURIAN IN THE ROMAN ARMY WAS THE OFFICER OVER A COMPANY OF LOOMEN, A RESPECTED
 MAN, ONE WHO HAD SERVANTS, AND LIVED RATHER WELL. ONE SERVANT DID NOT HAVE TO
 MEAN MUCH TO HIM BUT IN THIS CASE IT DID. THIS MAN, LIKE THE LEPER, WHOLEHEARTEDLY

BELIEVED THAT JESUS COULD HEAL HIS SERVANT: HE ALSO BELIEVED THAT JESUS COMPASSION AND KINDNESS WERE TRUE AND SINCERE. HE BELIEVED SO MUCH THAT ALL HE ASKED WAS THAT JESUS SAY THE WORD THAT HIS SERVANT MIGHT BE HEALED.

THESE ARE TWO OUTSTANDING EXAMPLES OF MEN WHO HAD FAITH; NOT BLIND TRUST BUT A KNOWING, UNDERSTANDING FAITH IN JESUS' POWER AND MORE IMPORTANT, IN HIS LOVE AND COMPASSION.

THESE INSTANCES OF FAITH, AND OTHERS LIKE THEM ARE EASILY MISINTERPRETED SO BEFORE WE DEFINE WHAT FAITH MUST BE LET US SEE WHAT IT IS NOT.

FAITH IS NOT A TOOL FOR PERFORMING MAGIC. PERHAPS THE BEST EXAMPLE OF THIS USE OF FAITH IS PETER'S ATTEMPT TO WALK ON WATER AS JESUS HAD DONE. PETER WANTED TO PROVE SOMETHING, HE WANTED TO BE SHOWN THAT OF HIS OWN POWER HE COULD OVERCOME THE LAWS OF NATURE. THIS SIMPLY IS NOT FAITH. ONE CAN BELIEVE AS STRONGLY AS HE CAN THAT HE IS ABLE TO DEFY THE LAW OF GRAVITY, HOWEVER, NOTHING IN THE WORLD OR IN HIS MIND CAN STOP HIM FROM FALLING IF HE DECIDED TO PROVE IT BY STEPPING OUT OF A WINDOW.

FAITH THAT IS USED TO PROCURE MATERIAL OBJECTS IS NOT FAITH EITHER. I AM REMINDED OF THE STORY OF THE LITTLE GIRL WHO SAID SHE HAD FAITH THE GOD WOULD GIVE HER ROLLER SKATES. A SUSPICIOUS FRIEND SUGGESTED THAT GOD DOESN'T ANSWER PRAYERS SO SHE DECIDED TO PROVE HER FAITH. AFTER WEEKS OF PRAYER AND NO SKATES THE FRIEND TAUNTED

"SEE I TOLD YOU GOD DOESN'T ANSWER PRAYERS," "OH YES HE DOES" REPLIED OUR FAITHFUL FRIEND, "HE SAID NO". ALTHOUGH THIS STORY HAS SOME POINT TO IT I THINK ITS MAJOR OFFERING IS NOT THAT GOD ANSWERS PRAYER BUT THAT THE LITTLE GIRL WHO WAS SO CONFIDENT SIMPLY HAD NO IDEA WHATSOEVER OF THE REAL MEANING OF FAITH.

FAITH IS NOT BLIND ACCEPTANCE EITHER, AND HERE IS THE BIGGEST AREA OF MISUNDERSTANDING. A GREAT MANY CHRISTIANS ARE EXPOSED TO SUNDAY SCHOOL STORIES AS CHILDREN AND NEVER, THROUGHOUT THEIR LIFE, FIND IT NECESSARY TO DELVE ANY DEEPER. SOMEONE HAST TOLD THEM THAT GOD IS LOVE THAT JESUS SAVES AND THIS IS ENOUGH THIS IS ~~THEIR~~ ^{THE EXTENT OF THEIR} FAITH. ALL ONE NEEDS TO BE A CHRISTIAN IS A FEW TRICKY PHRASES, AN ABILITY TO MEMORIZE AND QUOTE A BIBLE VERSE ON ANY OCCASION AND ABOVE ALL A STUBBORN RESISTANCE TO ~~THINK~~ ^{MENTAL INVOLVEMENT}. WHAT PARENTS HAVE TOLD US, WHAT SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHERS HAVE TAUGHT, WHAT ^{ALONE} MINISTERS HAVE SAID, AND EVEN WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS IS NOT SUFFICIENT TO CALL IT FAITH.

TRUE FAITH CAN ONLY RESULT FROM A STRUGGLE: BELIEFS MUST BE ^WRESTLED WITH, TURNED OVER AND OVER IN ONE'S MIND UNTIL THEY HAVE MEANING. BY THE GRACIOUSNESS OF GOD WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN MINDS, ^{THE} POWERS TO REASON AND UNDERSTAND, ^{TO} REFUSE TO USE THESE POWERS IN OUR RELIGION IS SIMPLY TURNING OUR BACKS ON FAITH. I HAVE OFTEN HEARD PEOPLE TALK ABOUT HOW MUCH FAITH THE DISCIPLES MUST HAVE HAD. ^{Think again} THEY HAD SO MUCH FAITH THAT A FEW HOURS AFTER THEIR LORD HAD DIED, THEY WERE IN HIDING, COWERING BEHIND LOCKED DOORS, WONDERING "HOW COULD THIS BE" CERTAINLY DOUBTING OF WHAT THEY HAD

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BELIEVED WAS ACTUALLY TRUE. / BUT IT WAS OUT OF THIS PERIOD OF DESPAIR AND DOUBT
THAT DREW A FAITH SO GREAT THAT FROM THAT PITIFULLY SMALL GROUP THE NAME OF JESUS
CHRIST WAS SPREAD ALL OVER THE WORLD.

THE UNDERSTANDING THAT CAME AFTER THEIR PERIOD OF DOUBT ENLARGED AND ACTIVATED THEIR
FAITH, / MADE IT BLOSSOM AND BECAME A DRIVING FORCE THAT WOULD NOT BE EXTINGUISHED.

WE ARE NO DIFFERENT, A RELIGION THAT IS BLANDLY ACCEPTED, / SWALLOWED WHOLE WITHOUT
QUESTION / CANNOT BE CALLED FAITH.

OUR FAITH WILL BE DYNAMIC ONLY AFTER IT HAS RACKED OUR MINDS, ONLY AFTER WE HAVE
BECOME COMPLETELY MENTALLED INVOLVED IN ITS MANY FACETS. / FAITH IS ONLY FAITH
IF IT IS TEMPERED WITH KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING. THIS IN TURN IS POSSIBLE
ONLY THROUGH A FACING AND STRUGGLING WITH ISSUES.

THE BEST SINGLE WORD TO DESCRIBE FAITH IS TRUST. / VOLUMES UPON VOLUMES HAVE BEEN
WRITTEN IN AN ATTEMPT TO EXPLAIN AND DESCRIBE FAITH SO I HOPE MY USING ONE WORD WILL
NOT REDUCE THE DEEP MEANING THAT MUST BE THERE. BUT IF WE HAD TO DESCRIBE FAITH
IN ONE WORD WE COULD DO SO MOST EFFICIENTLY WITH TRUST.

BELIEVING IN GOD, CONSENTING TO THE EXISTENCE OF GOD IS NOT NECESSARILY FAITH.
THERE ARE FEW MEN THAT WOULD OURIGHTLY DENY THE EXISTENCE OF A SUPREME BEING, THERE ARE
SOME, BUT WHEN IT COMES RIGHT DOWN TO IT THEIR NUMBER IS SMALL. BUT MERELY STATING
"SURE I BELIEVE IN GOD" DOES NOT IMPLY FAITH. (FAITH MUST GO FURTHER THAN MENTAL

CONSENT THAT THERE IS A GOD, FAITH MUST TRUST THIS GOD, FAITH MUST BE AWARE TO GOD
 AS HE SPEAKS AND ACTS AND ABOVE ALL ELSE IT MUST BELIEVE AND TRUST WHAT IT SEES AND
HEARS.

MEN HAVE CONSTANTLY TURNED THEIR BACKS WHEN APPROACHED BY GOD, THEY HAVE SHUT THEIR EYES
 TO HIS WORKS AND REFUSED TO LISTEN WHEN HE SPEAKS. THE ENTIRE OLD TESTAMENT MAY
 BE SEEN AS THE STORY OF MAN'S FAILURE TO ACHIEVE FAITH. GOD SPOKE TO HIS CHOSEN
 PEOPLE TIME AND TIME AGAIN, IN THE FLIGHT FROM EGYPT, IN THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE
WILDERNESS, ON MT. SINAI, IN THE FULFILLED PROMISE OF A LAND OF THEIR OWN. THE
JEWS NEVER DOUBTED THAT THERE WAS A GOD, THEY BELIEVED IN GOD, WHAT THEY DIDN'T
 DO ~~WAS~~ BELIEVE HIM WHEN HE SPOKE OR ACTED. THEIR FAITH WAS INCOMPLETE BECAUSE THEY
NEVER REALLY TRUSTED GOD. EVERY NEW DAY ON THE LONG TRIP FROM EGYPT TO ISRAEL FOUND
 THEM GRUMBLING AND DOUBTING, DOUBTING THAT GOD WOULD HOLD TO HIS WORD.

FAITH IS BEING ALERT TO GOD'S WORDS AND ACTIONS AND TRUSTING THEM EXPLICITLY. FAITH
 IS THE REALIZATION THAT WHEN GOD MAKES IT KNOWN THAT HE LOVES HE MEANS IT, THAT WHEN
 HE MAKES IT KNOWN THAT HE IS CONCERNED WITH EVERY MAN, HE MEANS IT.

HOW OFTEN OUR FAITH HAS FALLEN SHORT AT THIS POINT? HOW MANY TIMES HAVE WE TURNED OUR
 BACKS, HOW FREQUENTLY HAVE WE SHUT OUT THE STILL SMALL VOICE BECAUSE WE ARE TOO ~~LONG~~ BUSY TO
 LISTEN, HOW MANY TIMES HAVE WE FAILED TO RECOGNIZE THE NEARNESS OF GOD?

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just how seriously do we take the promise that god loves and cares for us / does
IT HAVE ANY AFFECT? DO WE REALLY TRUST?

AT THE TIME OF THE REFORMATION THE WORD FAITH WAS GREATLY CHANGED AND ENLARGED.
FOR CENTURIES "FAITH" ~~HAD~~ BEEN PRETTY MUCH OF AN EMPTY TERM. A PERSON'S FAITH
WAS DETERMINED BY HOW WELL HE OBEYED THE VAST SYSTEM OF CHURCH RULES AND REGULATIONS,
HOW REGULAR HE WAS IN ATTENDANCE AND CONTRIBUTIONS ETC.

THE REFORMERS, LUTHER, CALVIN, TOOK THIS MEANINGLESS TERM AND RESTORED IT TO
POSITION OF PRIMARY IMPORTANCE. THEY RECOGNIZED THAT THE WORD FAITH WAS CENTRAL TO
CHRISTIANITY. AND THEY CAME UP WITH THE BEAUTIFULLY PROFOUND TRUTH THAT FAITH IS A
GIFT OF GOD / A PRIVILEGE WE HAVE BECAUSE OF HIS GOODNESS.

HAVING FAILED TO APPRECIATE HIS ACTS OF LOVE AND CONCERN IN THE PAST / GOD / AS BLUNTLY
AND PLAINLY AS POSSIBLE DEMONSTRATED THAT HE WAS AS GOOD AS HIS WORD. HE REVEALED
HIMSELF IN A WAY MEN COULD SEE AND HEAR AND EXPERIENCE, IN JESUS CHRIST. WE HAVE
BEEN SHOWN THAT WE CAN TRUST GOD, THAT HE IS TRUSTWORTHY, THAT HE DOES LOVE AND IS
CONCERNED ABOUT MAN, WE HAVE BEEN SHOWN THAT WE MIGHT HAVE FAITH.

THE ACCOUNTS OF THE HEALING OF LEPER
& Cent's servant are accounts of FAITH - Instances
WHEN MEN TOOK JESUS CHRIST AT HIS WORD.
THEY TRULY TRUSTED HIM.

FAITH CANNOT BE A MEANINGLESS
TERM, IT CAN'T BE BLIND ACCEPTANCE -
IT MUST BE THE OUTCOME OF ~~THE~~ MENTAL
STRUGGLING, THINKING & RETHINKING -
IT MUST BLOSSOM FORTH AS
COMPLETE TRUST IN A GOD THAT
IS TRUSTWORTHY, THAT HAS KEPT
HIS PROMISE,

WE CAN TRUST - WE HAVE BEEN
GIVEN THE PRIVILEGE OF HAVING
FAITH - ~~BECAUSE GOD HAS GIVEN~~
~~US JESUS CHRIST~~, WE HAVE BEEN SHOWN
THAT WE CAN PULL OUT ALL THE STOPS,
AND UNRESERVEDLY TRUST OUR LORD. IN
JESUS CHRIST GOD HAS GIVEN US CONCRETE
PROOF THAT HE IS AS GOOD AS HIS
WORD - LET US NOT TURN OUR BACKS -
WHEN HE SPEAKS LET US RESPOND -
LET US HAVE FAITH.